

Seduction, Surveillance, and Subversion: A Gendered Study of Mossad's Ideological Warfare through the Cases of Sylvia Rafael and Catherine Shakdam

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ABSTRACT: The following research Article describes a gender centered account of the exemplary operational strategies of the Israeli intelligence facilitation firm the Mossad through the documented life of two women i.e., Sylvia Rafael and Catherine Perez-Shakdam. Based on archival information, memoirs, declassified records, and reliable media investigations, the paper will analyze the use of gender and identity construction and ideological orientation in human intelligence (HUMINT) operations. One of the participants of the Cold War, the undercover Israeli campaign after the Munich massacre was Sylvia Rafael who worked under the alias of a journalist to help locate the desired targets. Catherine Perez-Shakdam is a contemporary political commentator who was a contributor to Iranian state media, subsequently publicly denounced her religious identity, raising concerns with the manipulation and control of ideology and access. It does not make speculative conclusions, yet the paper presents patterns in the use of gendered identity in intelligence that can be verified. It forms part of the critical research in the field of intelligence in wondering how the traditional and non traditional facets of espionage become grown-up reliant on the performative identity within the notionally sensitive political set ups.

KEYWORDS: MOSSAD, Gendered Espionage, Sylvia Rafael, Catherine, Humint, Ideological Warfare, Identity Manipulation, Asymmetric Intelligence, Psychological Operations.

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Introduction

Cinema has been a masculinized sport long known to refer to espionage in terms of masculinized figures such as James Bond, who are characterized by guns, gadgets, and electrifying escapes. However, the academic research in the field of intelligence operations is experiencing a significant refocus to the gendered tactics which emphasize the importance of applying femininity as a strategic means of human intelligence (HUMINT) and ideological warfare. In this paper, two interesting cases will be discussed where the Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad, managed to recruit two women as spies in their service- Sylvia Rafael and Catherine Perez-Shakdam, which brings to the fore the interplay of gender, identity and ideology in contemporary espionage and how it can be used as a new pivot in the doctrine of espionage, shifting the combat nature of spying usually based on kinetic activities towards infiltration of ideologies.

Gender in HUMINT and Ideological Subversion

The HUMINT has always strictly depended on psychological and interpersonal approaches. Aldrich (2009) observes that such trust is usually key to success in closed networks that are not accessible to the technical surveillance. Much neglected in a history of espionage, women typically take advantage of gender prejudices in society, where innocence or the easiness to perceive emotional appeal may open the doors that can never be opened to a man. This renders female operatives to have the capacity of undertaking deep-cover operation in which they might be required to infiltrate certain systems or groups of ideologies.

Sylvia Rafael: From Photojournalist to Operational Asset

Born in South Africa, Sylvia Rafael (nee Raphael) was recruited in Mossad in the era 1960s and was subsequently trained as a photojournalist - a position that served as a cover to perform surveillance in Europe and the Middle East (Bailey, 2018; Ghert, 2025). Her service to the Operation Wrath of God, the secret operation after the Munich massacre, evidenced the potential of visual intelligence to support the specific action (Bailey, 2018). Rafael took important photographs which connected the members of Black September to terrorist activities (Bailey, 2018). Nevertheless, her arrest in Norway, during the Lillehammer killing of an innocent man by the agents, is a major course of operation blemishes in the existence of the Mossad (Fabricius, 2005). Although Rafael was in no way directly involved in the assassination itself, her arrest prompted important ethical and logistical issues of HUMINT relying on deceit and the lives of innocent people being put in danger (Bailey, 2018).

Catherine Perez-Shakdam: Ideological Infiltration

A modern-day example is a journalist Catherine PerezsesseCASHakdam (born in France), who in the second half of the 2010s infiltrated the Iranian political circles on the pretext of a deeply religious Islamic faith. Her alleged contacts with the top officials, such as the then-candidate Ebrahim Raisi, and connections to the IRGC-affiliated media, can be regarded as ideological infiltration of closed environments to foreign intelligence (Boxerman, 2022; JC, 2023). She changed her position following her renouncement of Islam at the beginning of 2022 due to the alleged need to present herself as strategic cover and rebranded into a pro-Israel commentator (Ghert, 2025). This has since seen Iranian officials accuse her of leaking intelligence involved in the June 2025 security operations (Isaacson, 2025). Her case shows how belief systems and religious identity can be very effective access points to intelligence gathering without the use of coercion even the strategic shift by the Mossad towards ideological warfare.

From Kinetic Operations to Performative Infiltration

The parallel of Rafael and Shakdam highlights a doctrinal change in the Mossad approach. The missions done by Rafael focused on surveillance, intelligence and tactical neutralization, characteristics of kinetic intelligence. On the other hand, the strategy of Shakdam portrays cognitive infiltration: the combination of religious identification and the media demeanor to reach closed settings and shape the stories, a sort of psychological and ideological terrorist act. These emerging practices are proxies to the wider patterns of intelligence that lean towards HUMINT specialisation, control of narratives, and manipulation of beliefs in the contemporary asymmetric conflicts.

Contribution to Critical Intelligence Studies

This study focuses on the female operatives by making them the core objects of action and influence and thereby makes masculinist paradigms of espionage deficient, paving the way in the domain of critical intelligence studies. It presents empirically based descriptions of gendered operations, and it is not speculative but based on archival reportage, media coverage and first person accounts. It brings up critical questions: How has gender and belief turned into the intelligence assets? What codes of conduct are followed in such a situation when the operatives use identity to make insider influence under the cloak of secrecy? The questions are relevant in the shaping of a better understanding of the operations of intelligence agencies in the ideological and networked space.

Comparative Analysis: Gender, Identity and Strategic Penetration

Sylvia Rafael and Catherine Perez-Shakdam are just two examples of such doctrinal transformation of Mossad about conducting kinetic intelligence, rather than cognitive, operations, as women employ the notions of gender as a career tool, the latter, still, significantly different. The main tasks of Rafael during the cold war and after Munich were direct surveillance and verification of targets. Being a photojournalist by trade, she used her physical appearance, as well as perceived objectivity, to gain entry into the European pro-Palestinian circles, helping with organizing an operation like Wrath of God (JPOST, 2018; Oren & Kfir, 2014). She was able to perform the role of a near invisible observer in the patriarchy political setting because her femininity had been operationalized to serve the functions of stealthiness and proximity. Comparatively, the fact that Shakdam was inserted in the ideological and religious elite of Iran could be considered a transition towards the idea of performative infiltration. The Islamic identity she adopted and the scholar reputation gave her access to theocratic spaces that were otherwise unattainable to ordinary espionage (Isaacson, 2025; Ghert, 2025, 2023). Her presence seems to have more to do with ideological rather than logistical intelligence manipulation, with her focus in shaping narratives, perhaps even allowing certain indirect strategic effects to be facilitated. Shakdam represented the psychological phase of subversion as opposed to the tactical phase of espionage that Rafael used. Their joint experience is a case in point for strategic transformation: that of exploiting the male desire and social blindness to gender to the exploitation of ideological susceptibility and ideologies as the rich field of persuasion, as Mossad itself increasingly relies on soft power and subcognitive influence in hostile contexts.

Research Questions

- ▶ What is female identity as an operational issue of Mossad in the stories of intelligence against various geopolitical circumstances? Themes: Cold War (Rafael) to ideological infiltration of the 21st century.
- ▶ How can gender and identity manipulation be used as an agent of ideological subversion in would be asymmetric intelligence warfare?
- ▶ Which strategic changes in the Mossad doctrine can be described as a result of a comparative study of kinetic (Rafael) and cognitive (Shakdam) intelligence missions?
- ▶ What do these cases demonstrate in terms of complicating or extending those which exist in literature in critical intelligence studies and gendered security discourse?

Research Objectives

- ▶ In order to discuss gendered aspects of the HUMINT approaches of Mossad, considering the operational biographies of two major women officers.
- ▶ To find out the Israeli intelligence tactical and doctrinal change of physical elimination to ideological penetration.
- ▶ To assess the contribution of identity manipulation, such as religion, ethnicity, and gender, in gaining infiltration, access to, and influencing networks of an adversary as well as destabilizing their networks.
- ▶ In order to make a contribution to the vital intelligence and feminist studies of security through the lens of conceptualizing the female operatives as strategic ideological weapons rather than passive capital.
- ▶ It is necessary to put these examples of espionage in the global intelligence context, especially in context of non-kinetic warfare and manipulation through belief in action.

Significance and Originality

The specific study presents important and original contribution into critical intelligence and security research as it places gendered aspects of espionage into forefront with the help of contrasting cases of Sylvia Rafael and Catherine Perez-Shakdam. Although the few available literature tend to ignore female participation in intelligence, this study recontextualizes women as the main agents in subversion of ideologies and deceptive moves. It illustrates a doctrinal shift in Mossad operations a transition away, as it were, of kinetic forms of assassination to cognitive forms of infiltration to show how femininity, identity, and belief can all become powerful agents of access and influence. It is unique in that it blends gender analysis and geopolitical strategy in order to study espionage as a form of psychological, as well as ideological warfare.

Literature Review

Gender and HUMINT Strategy

Much of Espionage literature has been male oriented and more often than not the contributions of women within the intelligence operations have been ignored in most of what has been written. Belkhir and Duyme (1998) point to the fact that gender bias in intelligence studies marginalizes the female agents. Its practitioners claim that the supposed female innocence and trustworthiness in emotions may be used intentionally to give operatives covert access to important information during HUMINT operations. Aldrich (2009) continues to add that efficient human intelligence is highly dependent on the psychological and interpersonal trust- two areas, where gender-based stereotypes are likely to offer operation exceptionalism.

Sylvia Rafael: A Case Study on Tactical Infiltration

The career of Sylvia Rafael demonstrates an excellent example of how Mossad took advantage of femininity and professional cover identities to drive an advantage. Rafael was a trained photojournalist who managed to access the European networks and most importantly spread vital intelligence as part of Operation Wrath of God (Bergman, 2018). Her photography art work also won her privileges with critical personalities in Arab resistance movement (Times of Israel, 2013; Chronicle, 2015). The case of Rafael in Lillehammer highlights the danger of conducting gendered espionage operation-wise. And the unintentional murder of an innocent

bystander resulted in her arrest and conviction, going once again to the fact that her gender was both an asset and not enough to hold to the ethical and practical consequences in full measure (Lay Of The Land, 2024).

Catherine Perez-Shakdam: Ideological Infiltration

The case of Catherine Perez-Shakdam since circa 2016 is a new variant of cognitive espionage. Being a French-born journalist now in an Islamic public image, Shakdam managed to gain access to Iranian political elites, including such representatives as Raisi and IRGC-related media sources (Isaacson, 2025); Times of Israel, 2023). Subsequently, the Iranian media made allegations that she might have passed strategic intelligence employed when dealing with Iran-related activities (Organiser; Isaacson, 2025). Although her activity is highly disputed, including the accusations of espionage, which she denies (Shakdam, 2023), her actions are another example of how particular ideologies could be broken by playing religious conversion and the freedom of speech provided by the media (Iran International, 2022; Khyber Chronicles, 2015).

The Kinetic to Cognitive Doctrine

The comparison between Rafael and Shakdam can be used to highlight a shift in intelligence thought in Mossad, even as it is consistent with the evolution in the intelligence studies in general. The time of Rafael was foaled on kinetic strategies, such as surveillance, target verification, and tactical shot, as was characteristic of the Cold War (Bergman, 2018). The illuminations of Shakdam are the epitome of cognitive warfare whereby manipulation through ideology by means of a belief system takes priority. This development follows the trends in the world where the intelligence services are focusing more on psychological operations and penetration of beliefs to manipulate the enemies without necessarily engaging in direct violence.

Studies on critical Security and Intelligence

Combining the theory of feminist insights with critical intelligence, researchers defy conventional standpoints that exclude gendered strategies in the world of spies. According to Belkhir and Duyme (1998), gender-based analysis expands our definitions of intelligence, in addition to power of brute force, to other facets of social as well as psychological standpoints. Intelligence operations have been conducted through natural human networks and belief systems, i.e., HUMINT today have become that which has effectively turned soft skills such as trust, access, and ideological alignment into war tools.

Methodology

In conducting this research study, the investigation team adopts a qualitative case study approach that is both comparative and uses Sylvia Rafael and Catherine Perez-Shakdam

as examples of gendered operational strategies at Mossad. Based on the publicly accessible sources primarily comprised of declassified recordings, autobiographies of the spies, investigative journalism, and scholarship, the study deploys the method of critical discourse analysis to discuss the role of gender, identity, and ideology as a weapon of espionage. The choice of cases to be used is based on a historical and strategic opposition: Rafael is supposed to symbolize the world of cartoonish kinetic Cold War-era intelligence, and

Shakdam is an example of current cognitive and ideological subversion. The way of infiltration, cover identities usage, and strategic consequences are given analytical attention. There are ethical research standards practiced with only legitimate and provable data. Weaknesses are limited access to classified intelligence and use of interpretation analysis. However, the study enhances feminist security studies and critical intelligence theory in the way it conceptualizes women as agents to the core tool in the new asymmetric war of intelligence.

Discussion

This paper positions the contribution to be made by female operatives to the development of a doctrine of intelligence to the fore, with the context of strategic continuum between the kinetic or cognitive warfare. Catherine Perez-Shakdam or Sylvia Rafael are the ideal examples of how Mossad has instrumentalized gender and identity in different time and ideatory contexts to benefit strategic intelligence.

The Gender as Strategic Capital

The two agents show how intelligences exploit gender based trust systems. The cover of a European photojournalist allowed Rafael to get close to male-dominated political areas where the same path was not open to male operatives (Ghert, 2025; Chronicle, 2015). Perez-Shakdam also used gender--with an accent on the religious identity--to integrate with inner circles of Iran ideology leadership. The fact that she was Muslim woman got her access to certain closed areas, including women social salons, where strategic information was exchanged (Isaacson, 2025; KDRTV, 2025). These examples show deliberate use of gender norms as forms of intelligent power, moving the logic of operation away from brute force towards relations of influence.

Manipulations of Identities and Ideological Infiltration

Agents of both sides embraced culture-specific identities as the means of legitimizing themselves in the eyes of their audience: Rafael presented himself as a European correspondent whereas Perez-Shakdam claimed to be a devout Muslim. The photo cover of Rafael gave her a believable leverage in the media arenas (Lay Of The Land, 2024; Ghert, 2025) and the religious character that Perez-Shakdam took on and accompanied by her publicized conversion to Islam created credibility in a very ideologically-defended climate (Turner, 2024; Isaacson, 2025). The approach enabled the agents to become members of a systemically closed circuit thus making the sabotage of ideology, as opposed to physical targets, the ultimate intelligence target.

Strategic Shift in Doctrines of the Mossad

The cases are however an indicator of a sharp change in the doctrinal emphasis of the violence-precise element of assassination by Mossad to information disruption and the aspect of psychological warfare. Such operatives as Rafael provided the much-needed surveillance that allowed precise murders (Bergman, 2018; Ghert, 2025). On the contrary, Perez-Shakdam, equipped with intelligence collected on a basis of trust, had reportedly enabled strategic attacks without kinetic operations (Isaacson, 2025; Turner, 2024). The shift highlights an organizational shift in direction in line with longer-term trends in intelligence toward nonviolent, ideology-based influence as primary, rather than secondary, approaches.

Legal and Professional Consideration

International litigation and ethical concerns were aroused by the Lillehammer Affair, in which Rafael was used to help in an assassination he did not realize was going to occur. Her action led to her being arrested and charged with premeditated murder in Norway which is the country where her victim belonged (Wikipedia: Sylvia Raphael; Fabricius, 2005). These actions elicited worldwide discussions on individual responsibility, no-collateral risk and legality of the covert operations particularly in those cases where manipulation of identities results to unplanned actions. The actions of Perez-Shakdam are also ethically questionable: the systematic collection of information is ideologically false pretenses, more specifically through the use of religious conversion, which brings to moral considerations the issues of respect of individual beliefs, consent, and manipulation. The incident shows the political weaponization of Iran as she later denied that there were actions of an Iranian espionage operation (Times of Israel, 2023; Khyber Chronicles, 2015).

Intelligence Studies Implications

These case studies underline the necessity of the intelligence theory to inculcate gender and identity as central operational variables and not significantly marginal variables. They cross with the existing scholarship that favors a feminist perception of intelligence, which is more of a reconsideration of operatives as epistemic agents utilizing trust, belief, and gender instead of being sole machines of degeneration (Belkhir & Duyme, 1998). In addition, they also strengthen the claims of the use of the tools of soft power identity, culture, belief as such tools of strategic influence of the authoritarian environment. This alludes to the implication that the future intelligence paradigms must incorporate the infiltration based on genders, along with the hidebound sensitivities systematically as doctrines.

Organizational learning and Operational Risks

The incidents of Rafael capture and trial reveal the dangers of gendered spying clearly. As credible cover, her photography revealed the weakness of Mossad in identifying misidentification, and indeed prompted soul searching among Israeli intelligence (Lay Of The Land, 2024). The organization learning aspect will be clear when the Mossad is said to have adopted additional precautions when vetting people and legal advice after the event. Again, the geopolitical risk can be seen in the case of Perez-Shakdam: her posthumous public confession and subsequent purge by the Iranian media caused Tehran to increase its vetting requirements. This point of entry, publicity, and intra-institutional adjustment reflects a gendered intelligence ecosystem in reaction to ideological susceptibility and gendered tactic.

Comparative Analysis and strategic Typology

There exists a strategic continuum between the two cases due to a juxtaposition:

- ▶ **Rafael:** A female agent whose formal identity gave monitored nearness and offered kinetic results during a period of state-established militant assault.
- ▶ **Perez-Shakdam:** An operative who went through ideological and religious territories gleaning psychological intelligence points and implicitly backing strategic measures without direct violence.

So the gender doctrine of Mossad changes the visible image-based trust to the internalized belief-based access one- which means the broader typology of intelligence: seductive proximity to the ideological alignment.

General Applications and Future Studies

Such incidences are not unique to Mossad, but intelligence practitioners both in Israel and across the world use gender-based access in their secret operations. It may involve comparative research of Russian honey traps, Chinese infiltration through academic conversion or utilization of cultural assets by western services. Moreover, such notices as Olivia Jayne Frank a transgender agent working on cross-national levels indicate that gender identity manipulation can be employed in much larger advanced HUMINT practices (Olivia Frank case, 2024). Future scholars would consider fusion of intersectional variables including race, religion, sexual orientation to determine the extent to which identity tactics are being implemented on different global intelligence systems.

The story of Sylvia Rafael and Catherine Perez-Shakdam highlights a changing environment where being a female cannot be regarded as an added value to being an intelligence officer but is rather an essential tool in contemporary espionage. Their conflicting and interconnected tasks serve to exemplify how this strategic oriented adaptation by Mossad was required to deal with more nuanced and ideology-oriented wars. Male linguistic control and authority over women have undergone feminine relational access, identity performance and ideological tangling which reconstituted the parameters of productively distinct covert operations-the paradigm of an intelligence whose enactment in the modern intelligence culture is premised on belief, trust, and cognitive power. Critical intelligence scholarship is at the stage of development, and it should combine such gendered and ideological components to completely capture the subtext of contemporary security activities.

Conclusion

The paper has examined the gendered nature of intelligence work at Mossad by dwelling on the contrasting situations of Sylvia Rafael and Catherine Perez-. Their functions highlight a strategic shift between kinetic assassinations and ideological subversion with the gender and identity being treated as the instruments of the fundamental psychological warfare. Examples of such operatives display how the concept of espionage has gone beyond its physical targets to permeate into belief systems, institutions and geopolitics via culture masking and confidence manipulation. Their cases indicate larger patterns of lapses in intelligence: weaponization in the context of identity and erosion of ethical barriers in black projects.

Recommendation

Governments will need to review the ethical systems under which intelligence operations are conducted, particularly when identity and ideology are used against an individual. Conventions should increase protection against ideological penetrating and psychological warfare. In the learning of intelligence, gender and theory of ethics should be incorporated in training. Most importantly, democracies should develop a culture of openness as well as overcome the tendency of manipulation by ideology in order to maintain civil trust and address non-kinetic threats without undermining human dignity.

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